

# Working the Public, with Theaster Gates

Wednesday, January 24, 2018, at 7 p.m.  
California African American Museum Atrium  
600 State Drive, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, 90037

## ABOUT THEASTER GATES

- Theaster Gates (b. 1973) is an important contemporary artist, especially known for his work in the field of social practice, or art that engages communities and aims toward social change.
- Gates is an interdisciplinary artist. He is a potter, conceptual artist, events programmer, performer, sculptor, singer, and more. He considers the founding of organizations and revitalization of buildings to be art projects.
- His work is focused in his hometown, Chicago.
- He has degrees in urban planning, religion, and ceramics.
- He is a professor of visual arts and the director of the Arts + Public Life Program at the University of Chicago.
- He has worked directly with Rahm Emanuel, mayor of Chicago, on urban/art initiatives.

## DORCHESTER PROJECTS

In 2006, Theaster Gates purchased an abandoned building on Chicago's South Side. He refurbished the building using recycled materials and turned it into a multigenerational cultural hub, with a book and record library, and venues for community dinners, performances, youth art-making activities, film screenings, gardening, community-service days, and more.

The White Cube Gallery (which represents Gates) says: "Gates describes this project as 'real-estate art,' part of a 'circular ecological system' since the renovations of the buildings are financed entirely by the sale of sculptures and artworks that were created from the materials salvaged from their interiors."

Dorchester Projects was partly inspired by Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston, where artists renovated abandoned structures to create homes for low-income families. Dorchester Projects was also influenced by architect Samuel Mockbee's housing developments in rural Alabama, which Gates learned about as an urban-planning student in college. A related project here in Los Angeles was current USC Roski faculty Edgar Arceneaux's Watts House Project of c. 2010–12.

## "HOW DO YOU GET THE RESOURCES?"

Rick Lowe of Houston's Project Row Houses told *The New Yorker* that when Gates sought him out circa 2006, he asked Lowe, "How do you get the resources?" Lowe replied, "You leverage on the resources that you have."

Gates has worked out a process whereby he acquires property at low prices; uses recycled materials for renovations; makes art from the detritus of gutted buildings; uses some of the high dollar amounts his

*Double screen to shade dark histories*, 2016  
Hardwood, glazed ceramic, fur  
119 x 69 1/2 x 52 inches (302.3 x 176.5 x 132.1 cm) TG 176

artwork and public appearances fetch in the art market to fund social projects; buys more properties to turn into art/community spaces; and so forth.

As one example: When Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel sold Gates an abandoned bank building that had been set for demolition for \$1, on the condition that Gates refurbish it, Gates salvaged bits of marble from the building's interior, made them into objects that looked like bank bonds with the motto "In ART we trust," and sold them at the Art Basel fair in Switzerland for \$5000 apiece. Proceeds went back into the revitalization project in Chicago.

## FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Do you think art is always political? Sometimes political? Should never be political? Why?
- What do you think of the idea of founding an organization or revitalizing a building as an art form?
- Is there a social practice art project you'd like to create or see in your community?
- What do you think is the ideal way for art to be funded?

## TO LEARN MORE OR TAKE ACTION, CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES:

- Videos of Theaster Gates  
[art21.org/artist/theaster-gates](http://art21.org/artist/theaster-gates)
- Theaster Gates's Rebuild Foundation  
[rebuild-foundation.org](http://rebuild-foundation.org)
- John Colapinto, "The Real Estate Artist," *The New Yorker*  
[newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist](http://newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist)
- KCET's *Artbound*: Episode on Social Practice Art  
[kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/social-practice](http://kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/social-practice)

## DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

**STACY WILLIAMS** of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about Theaster Gates and his work. Those with a call number are physical items which you can find in our campus libraries. Those without a call number are electronic resources, which you can access through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at [libraries.usc.edu](http://libraries.usc.edu).

### RECOMMENDED BOOKS

- Boros, Diana. *Creative Rebellion for the Twenty-First Century: the Importance of Public and Interactive Art to Political Life in America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N8835 .B67 2012**
- Candy, Linda., and Ernest A. Edmonds. *Interacting: Art, Research and the Creative Practitioner*. Oxford, UK: Libri Publishing, 2011.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N7433.915 .I57 2011**
- Cartiere, Cameron, and Martin Zebracki. *The Everyday Practice of Public Art: Art, Space and Social Inclusion*. New York: Routledge, 2016.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N8825 .E94 2016**
- Deuze, Anna. *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N7433.915 .D6 2010**
- Gates, Theaster, et al. *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*. Köln, Germany: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N6537.G377 A4 2012**

## VOCABULARY CORNER

**INTERDISCIPLINARY:** Drawing on or working in multiple fields.

**PUBLIC ART:** Art that is created to be in public space. Public art can include anything from murals to monuments. The meaning of this term became increasingly political in the 1960s and '70s, as people active in the civil rights movement sought to reclaim public space, intervene in dominant narratives, and foreground the creative traditions and expressions of marginalized communities in highly visible ways.

**SOCIAL PRACTICE:** A recent (c. 2000–present) term identifying art practices that focus on the intersections among art, audience, and society and directly engage a non-specialized art public. Social practice art is often social justice- and community-oriented. Social practice art varies widely in terms of aesthetic and form; what it tends to have in common is a commitment to collaborative process and to social change through art.



The Dorchester Project, Archive House, Interior



Theaster Gates, *In Art we Trust*, 2013

- Gates, Theaster, et al. *Theaster Gates*. New York: Phaidon, 2015.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N6537.G377 A4 2015**
- Gates, Theaster, et al. *Theaster Gate: My Labor Is My Protest*. London: White Cube, 2012.  
**ARCHITECTURE AND FINE ARTS LIBRARY: N6537.G377 A4 2012B**

## RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

- Karimi, Pamela, et al. "Theaster Gates's Dorchester Projects in Chicago." *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 2 (2015): 193–206.
- Lasser, Ethan W. "Scaling up: Theaster Gates, Jr, and His Toolkit." *The Journal of Modern Craft* 6 no. 1 (2013): 79–86.
- Leake, Maria D. "Art as Social Practice: Exploring the Contemporary." *Art Education* 65, no. 2 (2012), 25–32.
- Marstine, Janet. "Cultural Collisions in Socially Engaged Artistic Practice: 'Temple Swapping' and Hybridity in the Work of Theaster Gates." *Museum Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2013) 153–178.
- McGraw, Hesse. "Theaster Gates: Radical Reform with Everyday Tools." *Afterall*, no. 30 (2012): 86–99.

## RECOMMENDED DATABASES

### Art & Architecture Archive

Art and Architecture Archive is a major research resource comprising the digitized backfiles of many of the foremost art and architecture magazines of the twentieth century.

### Arts & Humanities

This database features hundreds of titles covering Art, Architecture, Design, History, Philosophy, Music, Literature, Theatre, and Cultural Studies.

### Art Full Text (H.W. Wilson)

Art Full Text is a comprehensive resource for art information featuring full-text articles from more than 300 periodicals dating back to 1995, high-quality indexing and abstracting of over 600 periodicals dating as far back as 1984, including 280 peer-reviewed journals, as well as indexing and abstracting of over 13,000 art dissertations.

### ARTstor

Provides access to over a million high quality images of art and photography, with descriptions and provenance. Also includes images in the fields of anthropology and architecture.

### ProQuest Research Library

ProQuest Research Library is a multi-disciplinary index that covers dozens of subject areas and provides full-text for a significant number of the articles included. It is an excellent starting place for research for a paper.

## PODCASTS

### National Gallery of Art

Conversations with Artists: Theaster Gates  
<http://bit.ly/theasterpodcast1>

### New York Public Library

Theaster Gates: "I'm Trying to Create an Intimate Moment with Our Most Treasured Assets."  
<http://bit.ly/theasterpodcast2>

